Chapter 1

Atlantic Ocean

July 1683

The ship was slowly coming into view, and anticipation seemed to take over me. It was huge, one of the largest merchant ships I had ever had the pleasure of resting my gaze upon, and I could only imagine the cargo on board that ship. Silk and lace, tea and coffee, flour and sugar; the usual products my crew and I stole. But I was certain that there were plenty of ropes, coins, and vials of desperately needed medicine stored on that ship. And it was to be mine in only an hour or so. The regular merchandise would garner quite a bit of money as it always did, but it was the hope of finding a few golden coins and perhaps a couple bottles of laudanum that had me filled with expectation.

I was also short on crew members at the moment, so if I could find a few men worthy of hoisting my mainsail, I wouldn't complain. Not that an "honorable and respectable" stuffy little English-man could ever be worthy of stepping onto my deck.

But after the last storm, when several of the cowards had been weeded out by jumping off my ship in hopes of saving themselves—though a few men had caught pneumonia and died during that time—I was short. With a man-o'-war ship as big as mine, I needed plenty of men to handle it, for I couldn't do it all on my own. Although if one wanted something done correctly, I would heartily recommend doing it oneself.

Honestly, I missed Father's crew. Old men, they had been, but experienced and trustworthy. If only all of them, save Charlie, hadn't died over the past decade. Now, all I had were silly young men, naught but little babes, the whole lot of them. Though Keaton Clarke, one of my late crew members' nephew, was quite the pirate. He was hardworking and reliable, intelligent as well, as he had been raised a gentleman on land. And, of course, there was Elliot Fulton, not only my first mate but the man like a brother to me. Of all the men on my ship, Elliot had to be my favorite, not that I had time for such foolish-ness as singling out one man to favor. But despite Elliot and his brotherly trust and devotion, I missed Julius, would miss the little scalawag till the very day I died. One day, I continually vowed to myself, I would find my younger brother and serve Timothy Wilde a large slice of revenge for taking Julius and killing our father.

I banished the thought, the dreaded memory, as soon as it appeared, drawing my attention back to the merchant ship drifting closer to mine. Adjusting the spyglass I held in my hand, I

looked out the small hole, studying every inch of the ship ahead of me. A name had been carved into the side of the hull, and it took me a moment to realize I could not read the engraving. Blast—well, I wasn't quite sure what I was to blast, but blast something for my lack of knowle-dge of letters. Well, it was more like no knowledge rather than lack of. I had no idea how to read, not even my own name, as that ability was never needed in my profession. But it would help if I could read the name of the vessels I plundered, would it not?

"Charlie," I called over my shoulder, relieved when I heard the familiar slow but steady clomp of Charlie Acton's boots.

"Aye, Cap'n?" came Charlie's low, age-hardened voice from a few feet behind me. Barely reaching my collarbone, he was a rather short, stout man with broad shoulders and a burly chest. But despite his size, Charlie was quick; not just with his reflexes but with his mind. Sometimes, if one stared long and hard enough into his keen sapphire blue eyes, one could almost see his mind working.

His weathered, sun-bronzed skin contrasted with the graying blond hair that hung down his back in one long braid. Perhaps in his youth he had been quite the handsome man, what with his strong features and yellow mane, but now that he was older, I saw him only as a wise man that anyone would be honored to call their friend.

I turned, tossing him the spyglass. "Tell me the ship's name," I commanded with a frown as I leaned back against the balustrade, arms crossed over my chest. Sometimes it felt rather odd ordering around my father's oldest friend, the man who'd stepped into Father's place as mentor and guide after he had been murdered ten years past. But just as I had learned from Father, it was not wise to treat one man differently than the other, for jealousy was easily stricken between the men on board. One could never know when someone would turn against his fellow over something as simple as a breadcrumb. When one lived this sort of life, forever on the sea, agitation was easily borrowed.

Charlie held the spyglass up to his uncovered eye, taking only one glance out of the opening before replying. "*Paris*," was his answer.

I couldn't help but scoff. What a terrible name for such a glorious vessel. But to each his own, I supposed. Which *Rina* wasn't the most common name for a pirate ship, but it was what Father had named it, and it was to stay that way. Father's first ship had been named *Bella*—after whom, he had never told me. At times I wondered if perhaps that had been my mother's name. I knew next to nothing about my mother, for Father had never dared to speak of her. I had long ago reasoned that she must have died while birthing me, and Father's heart was too broken to ever think of her. He must have truly loved her, whomever she may have been. I could remember, though, the deep attraction between Father and Julius' mother Lavinia Shawe. Odd, I found it, how he had been so quick to love Julius' mother, and yet at the same time wouldn't speak of mine for all of the gold in Spain.

Charlie gave me a gap-tooth grin, handing me the spyglass. "*Paris,* as in the Greek god, Cap'n. 'Tisn't the worst o' names," he explained to me, though I still wondered why anyone

would name a ship that. If perhaps the captain was from the French city, I might would understand.

I brushed off my petty distaste toward the name, focusing solely on all the treasure that was waiting for me on that ship. Ah, ‘twas so sweet, I could taste it. And riches tasted rather good, not much different than those oranges I’d found last week.

At the thought of oranges, I began to wonder what kind of exotic fruit might be on the *Paris*. Perhaps some mangoes or coconuts. And some rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and diamonds. Not to mention strong, trustworthy men that I could use.

“Charlie, gather up the men, would you? We’ve got us a ship to raid,” I said, tucking the spyglass into my belt and making my way to where Elliot stood commandeering the ship.

His rough hands gripping the helm, a smirk forming on his lips, was Elliot Fulton Sr, my best friend and first mate. He was not only the most experienced man on my ship, but he also the father to a beautiful son, Elliot Jr, whom I oft referred to as Ellie. Elliot Sr was the son of one of my father’s original crew members—as were several of my men—and I found him to be the most recklessly courageous of them all. Perhaps ‘twas because of the pirate blood so deep in his veins, or just his natural stupidity, that he was the most rash of all the seamen I had ever met, but for those very same things, I found Elliot to be the better of my men. Sometimes, I had to admit, he became slightly rowdy, and was regularly the beginner of most arguments and fights between the men.

He was the only person on board that met my abnormally tall height, and had the same muscular yet slender physique as I did. His long dark brown hair was pulled back in a queue, but a few strands were flying around his face, getting caught in his dark beard. His piercing murky green-brown eye, the one not covered by his eye-patch, softened at the sight of me, and his smile broadened.

Oftentimes I felt an odd sense of pity for my friend—not out of the nonexistent goodness of my heart, mind you—but because I knew the loss he dealt with. You see, a year past he lost his wife in childbirth. I had to admit that originally I hadn’t approved of the union between Elliot and his bride, Mary Lynde, for I had believed that marriage was a waste of time—and I still thought so—but once Elliot’s son had entered the world, I supposed that I forgave my friend for growing soft and taking a wife. Mary herself had been strong mentally, I had to say, if not physically, as ever since stepping on board my ship, seasickness had plagued her. She had already been much too fragile to bear a child, and I was not shocked when the pain of birthing took her. I’d then taken her child under my wing, protecting him while on the ship, as I figured was my duty as captain. I still thought sending the child to England to live with a respectable family in assured safety would be ideal, but I had never to pressure my friend for the sake of breaking Elliot’s heart completely in two, if it wasn’t already.

“Awfully large ship there, wouldn’t ye say, Cap’n?” he questioned with a mirthful chuckle.

I rolled my eye at his joviality, as it was always present at the most inappropriate moments. But even I could not suppress a grin. And it was good to see him smiling again.

“Not large enough,” I countered, erasing the inkling of a smile from my lips. “Money is dwindling, and I am unsure if that is the result of less cargo being sold or if one of the men has been stealing from my coffer. And you know how I feel about such.” A sigh that bordered on a huff slipped through clenched teeth, as I remembered the last time I had reviewed my account book. At the least, ten pounds were missing, and it wouldn’t be long before ten pounds became twenty, and so forth. I couldn’t afford to lose my ill-gotten gains. And my crew couldn’t afford to lose a man should one of them be stealing.

Elliot’s eye went dim and he began to scratch his whiskered chin, a flicker of thought in his gaze. “Aye, that I do. Ought I do ye some investigatin’?”

I hitched a shoulder. “’Twouldn’t hurt.” In all honesty, looking into my crew was the furthest thing from my mind. All I could concentrate on was plundering that vessel.

I watched with delight as the boy squirmed beneath my blade, his bright blue eyes teeming with tears. I knew that I wasn’t going to kill him; Elliot knew the same. But the child didn’t, which in turn made my persuasion much easier. Yes, I was in need of men—strong, mature men—but one day my older crew would no longer be able to perform their duties as they did now, and I needed fresh, younger people to take their place. And so a child no more than ten and five years of age would make a great pupil to train. He was far from sea-hardened, probably had not set sail for his first time but just a fortnight ago, at the most, and I could only imagine his swordsmanship, but the younger I could break them in, the stronger they would be in the years to come.

“You are to cooperate with me, do you hear? And if you do not, it only takes one swipe of m cutlass to dispose of you,” I growled to the fair-haired, bright-eyed boy, letting the edge of my cutlass gently graze his collarbone. “So then, what say you, hmm?”

The boy was trembling violently, and his voice shook with cold fear as he replied, “Y-y-yes! Pl-please don’t kill me. I-I’ll do whatever you ask of me, I swear.”

I stepped back, slid my cutlass back into its sheath, and met the smirking gaze of my comrade. “Good. Now, stand up and dry your eyes. My crew is the best in the Seven Seas, and I shan’t have that reputation tarnished by one man’s childish actions. Elliot, I will let you handle him now,” I said, tossing the words over my shoulder as I pivoted on my heel and walked away.

I, as always, was correct about the *Paris’* cargo, and had managed to find a crate of medicine stored away along with three barrels of rum in the cargo hold, not to mention crates of food and fabric. And, of course, I had raided the captain’s money chest and filled mine.

And though the brigantine I had captured was small, the size of the crew on board was decent. Those who had accepted my offer to pirate and willingly signed my articles remained alive, while those who refused tasted death along with their captain. The ship, on the other hand, I had burned. I had, along with my *Rina*, an ex-navy frigate and a small brig at my disposal already. I had no need for more ships.

I marched into my cabin, a decent-sized room that almost resembled a noble's bedchamber in its finery. This was the only personal thing of mine that actually exuded my vast riches and fine taste, unless one desired to count the *Rina* herself. In this room I had once dreamt of a wealthy life on land, with both a father and mother, sisters and brothers, before Julius had been born when I was but a child.

Now I never bothered with such petty, infantile fantasies. My life was on the sea, and no other place could compare. No other place would ever have the same soft lady's breeze that ruffled one's hair, the same salty smell that flooded one's senses every time they stepped on deck. None other could dare to have the same cloudless sky some mornings, then burst into a living gale come evening. And no other place could ever be a home to me as the sea.

Shutting the wooden door behind me—did I mention the doorknob was pure gold?—I walked across the threshold as silently as possible, as not to awake young Ellie who slept soundly in the cradle alongside my bed, even if it would serve no purpose. It often surprised me how that child could sleep so peacefully even as a tempest raged outside. I could find nothing to cast the blame upon, yet I did know that it was the pirate blood flowing so deep in his veins that allowed him to be so accustomed to the ocean, even if that meant he didn't dare to wake during a storm as a good sailor should. He rarely made a peep, and was far from afeared of a little blood or battle. I knew Elliot would have a very easy time raising this boy in the ways of his father and the one before him.

I made my way to where my small desk rested, nailed to the floor underneath a window that allowed me a rather nice view of the ocean that trailed behind us. I pulled out of the locked drawer a sheet of paper filled with numbers. To any other person than myself, the blurred ink numerals would make absolutely no sense, but I could easily make out my smudges.
Though I had no knowledge in the subjects of reading and writing, I was accomplished in arithmetic and could write the symbols, albeit sloppily. And this particular sheet was more than a little sloppy in appearance. I doubted anyone could tell, but I had a certain form of organization to not only my math, but to my entire ship. A rather odd form, I would say, but one nonetheless.

As I retrieved my feather quill from the depths of my desk drawer, a soft moan was heard from against the wall behind me. I turned my head to see Elliot Jr roll over in his bed before snuggling back into his blanket and resuming to gently snore. Mentally I expelled a deep sigh, for if anyone knew me well enough, they would know that I hated to be interrupted during my accounting. Even if 'twas by that little one who had squeezed into my stone heart over the past year.

I turned back around and resumed my work when a knock sounded on my door. I had made not a single mark on my paper, dash it, and already I was being pulled away. I rose from

my chair, struggling to keep back a growl. For Ellie's sake. Because I was certain he wouldn't be able to sleep through what I was of a mind to do.

I jerked open the door to see Keaton standing there, his bare muscular arms folded over his chest. At near five years my junior and standing at an even six feet, the top of his head didn't even reach my chin, which caused him to have to take a step backward to meet my gaze. With tangled curls of raven black that danced with an array of colors in the sunlight and a calculating green glare, as well as strong features that only added to his rugged appearance, he could easily pass for handsome. But his skill was what mattered.

His uncle had been my father's quartermaster, and had dragged Keaton on board after his parents had died, when he was about ten and six. To my surprise, he had proved to be an excellent seaman, and I was proud to call him part of my crew. And my friend. Even if he always had the worst timing.

"Captain, I doubt you're in the mood to hear this..." Keaton began with a rough sigh. "I went back and counted the crates from our raid last week, and as it turns out, we happen to be down on the rum, and I found that a good portion of the—"

I held up my hand, already certain to where this conversation was going. And to whom it was going. "I know. Who do you suspect?"

"Roger Mansfield. We all know that he is a shifty character, which is near to everything that we do. I've wondered what had gotten into you when you let him on board," was his reply, a frown twisting his lips.

I jammed a hand through my thick brown waves, taking a deep breath. Rarely did one of my men question my judgment, as they had no reason to. But 'twas not the first time I had made a mistake—just the first in many, many years.

"That is only your opinion, not a fact,; however I have to agree. He was not my first choice, but you know how hard it has been since the storm last month. We've all been doing our share and more. If I hadn't secured him, Ellie would have had to man the helm for the past several weeks," I stated, crossing my arms over my chest and leaning against the door frame, casting a glance toward the still-sleeping babe over my shoulder.

Keaton shook a lock of hair out of his eyes, revealing the scar there and the swirl of thoughts behind the green haze. "I suppose you're right, but if I find that he has been causing problems, I shan't sit by and do nothing. And I don't expect you to either, Captain." And with that said, he marched away, leaving me to ponder the situation.

I couldn't risk losing *any* man, but I also couldn't stand having a sailor disobey my rules. I shoved those worries aside, walking back into my room and softly closing the door behind me. I had work to do.